

New Mexico State University – Las Cruces
Application to the HLC Academy for Assessment of Student Learning

The Offices of the President and Executive Vice President & Provost at New Mexico State University have invested in making an institutional commitment to meaningful assessment of student learning campus wide. In recent years much progress has been made to that effect, and participation in the Higher Learning Commission's Academy for Assessment of Student Learning offers an opportunity to sustain current momentum.

Recent Efforts

BRIEF INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY OF ASSESSMENT

NMSU responded to the first calls for student learning outcomes assessment in the 1990's. As is true on many campuses, this call was addressed through a top-down management system that mandated campus-wide participation in outcomes assessment. Again as is true on many campuses nationwide, not only did the rationale for doing assessment appear ambiguous, but *how* to do assessment seemed decidedly more elusive. Not surprisingly, initial efforts to institutionalize assessment of student learning were met with skepticism at best and guarded resistance at worst.

Transitional leadership throughout ensuing years, both in top administrative positions and in the assessment arena contributed to a mass culture of compliance reporting. While academic and support units were required to engage in assessment activity, wide-spread administrative and institutional support was not visibly apparent. Notably lacking were links between assessment and institutional policy, fiscal decisions, and reward structures for faculty and staff allocation of time and effort. None-the-less, representative individuals and areas have embraced authentic assessment practices, and have continued to provide leadership through example in the area of assessment.

RECENT EFFORTS & ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In recent years, through support from the Office of the Executive Vice President & Provost, a campaign has been launched to transform assessment from compliance-based accountability reporting to meaningful evidence-based assessment of student learning to strengthen and sustain quality programs. Below are several events that have promoted drastic shifts in views and attitudes toward assessment.

- Summer 2007: College of Arts and Sciences created an ad hoc committee that attended the New Mexico Higher Education Assessment Association (NMHEAA) Summer Retreat to develop a sustainable plan for coordinated assessment of the General Education/State Common Core curricula; this was implemented fall 2007 and continues through present.
- Summer 2007: Division of Student Success created a Plan of Action 2008-2012 for developing division, unit, and department goals and outcomes that are grounded in the institutions "Living the Vision" statement.
- Spring 2008: Provost created the University Outcomes Assessment Council (UOAC) which was initially a work group charged with developing a plan for rethinking how we do assessment on our campus. The result was a proposal, "Developing a Culture of Assessment: NMSU's Plan to Revitalize Assessment," that was presented to the HLC re-accreditation site-visit team in April of 2008. The site-visit team responded positively to the plan, and one member commented that it had the potential to be a national model. *Several of the following bulleted points are progress made in the implementation of that plan.* The UOAC is now a permanent Council with expanded membership representative of all areas, including academic and student support, on campus.
- Summer 2008 – Spring 2009: Provost sent a team to the NMHEAA Summer Retreat to begin working on a plan to assess first year programs. Throughout the following fall and spring, the team developed a proposed first year mission, goals, objectives and outcomes, and presented a proposed plan for assessment to the Provost in Spring 2009.
- Summer 2008 – Spring 2009: Provost paid summer compensation and 50% release time for the academic year for a faculty member to engage the campus community in developing first year (in collaboration with the first year assessment committee) and baccalaureate missions, goals, objectives

and outcomes. Release time was also used to re-structure implementation and evaluation of academic program assessment. Proposed first year and baccalaureate missions, goals, objectives and outcomes have been articulated, and will be circulated Fall 2008 among the campus community for feedback and adoption.

- Fall 2008: Booklet on academic assessment and developing mission, goals, objectives and outcomes was developed, distributed, and made available on an assessment website.
- Fall 2008 – Summer 2009: Significant changes in the implementation, reporting and feedback of academic program assessment were instituted.
- Fall 2008: Booklet on student support assessment was developed, distributed and made available on an assessment website.
- Summer 2009: Provost sent a team to the NMHEAA Summer Retreat to create an extensive faculty training program in the area of course-level and program-level assessment. The team developed a proposal where the training plan and solicitation of participants will be developed fall and spring of 2009-10, and training would commence fall of 2010. This involves the transition of a current assessment evaluation committee to be transformed into a training group heretofore referred to as the ChAMPION program. The proposal has been approved by the Provost.
- Summer 2009: Provost paid summer compensation for 1) work on the ChAMPION program, 2) documenting assessment endeavors for the 2008-09 academic year, 3) meeting individually with all departments/programs concerning academic program assessment to create better understanding and value of assessment, and 4) developing an assessment calendar that would include training, open forums and increased visibility of assessment campus-wide.
- Summer 2009: College of Education sent a committee to the NMHEAA Summer Retreat to 1) review the scope of data reports used to gather information for NCATE and determine which instruments are most meaningful to teacher education faculty and program directors and 2) develop a plan for reporting data (which data, in what format, how often and to whom) that will in effect transform what is currently a compliance-based exercise into one that useful to faculty and program directors as they consider evidence-based program changes and improvements.
- Fall 2009 – Spring 2010: Newly hired Interim Assistant to the Provost will focus primarily on assessment. Duties include: Coordinating all assessment activities; Developing and implementing training for department heads and deans; Coordinating and implementing training for new hires; Creating a budget for assessment; Continued restructuring of academic program assessment; Leadership in developing the ChAMPION training program; Coordinating and supporting General Education assessment; Continuing development and adoption of proposed first year and baccalaureate missions, goals, objectives and outcomes; Initiating changes in policy statements, hiring documents and interviewing processes that consider and promote assessment; Developing and distributing an Assessment Newsletter; Launching events that produce visibility of assessment, and entertaining opinions, concerns, struggles and successes with assessment and; Organizing and leading a team to participate in the HLC Assessment Academy.
- Assessment of Student Learning mission, goals & objectives have been developed. Mission: *To Promote, facilitate and communicate a positive culture and unrelenting institutional commitment to evidence-based teaching and learning that transcends discipline and area divisions.*

Additionally, NMSU touts a top-notch Teaching Academy that is second to none. The Academy provides continued support by bringing in nationally acclaimed assessment experts as well as highlighting our own campus stars in the area of assessment. In the last two years the Teaching Academy has brought to our campus such names as Tom Angelo, Peggy Maki, Mary Allen, Susan Hatfield and Janice Denton. Spring 2008 they sponsored a panel discussion for Department Heads on academic program assessment. This fall, Mary Allen will return, and it is hoped Doug Eger will be on campus in the near future. There are numerous other presentations on assessment or assessment related topics each year, and the facility is widely used by NMSU faculty.

Needs and Benefits

PRESSING NEEDS TO BE ADDRESSED THROUGH PARTICIPATION IN THE ASSESSMENT ACADEMY

Because we have so many new initiatives in fairly early phases of development, this is a crucial time to ensure each can be sustained and integrated in meaningful ways. Currently work is being done 1) at the first-year level, 2) in general education (coupled with our own state required Common Core), 3) in academic and student support program levels, 4) institution-wide at the baccalaureate level, and 5) for many academic units at the national level through external accrediting bodies. Developed in isolation, the complexity and demand of each of these initiatives have the potential to overwhelm faculty, administrators and staff alike. Viewed comprehensively each level contributes to integrated goals and objectives, thereby eliminating the need for duplication of efforts. Mapping from course and unit objectives through the institutional mission should be seamless; providing cohesion and communicating a vision of student learning in which independent components contribute to shared-goals through uniquely designed learning opportunities.

Cultivating a vision and establishing a working structure through which it can be realized will be a labor intensive process. Participation in the Academy will provide a venue through which these needs can be addressed.

WHY IS THE ACADEMY KEY TO YOUR SUCCESS NOW?

Vision and commitment are the keys to successfully institutionalizing integrated authentic assessment of student learning. Secondly, communication to and buy-in from faculty, staff and administration are necessary to establish a culture that embraces and engages in authentic assessment at all levels of the institution. It is anticipated that participation in the Academy will provide gravely needed opportunities to bring together appropriate and committed area representatives in an environment where we can focus solely on the issues at hand. Such opportunities will provide momentum and direction for the team as well as provide access to mentors who can provide direction and expertise along the way. Timing for this unique opportunity is ideal: We have many initiatives already in play, but require additional energy in structuring integration that supports development and fosters collaboration.

GOALS & FOCUS OF EFFORTS FOR THE ACADEMY (E.G., PROJECTS, INITIATIVES, ACTIVITIES, WORK)?

The goal for this team is to cultivate, sustain and integrate all areas of student learning outcomes assessment including First-Year Initiatives, General Education/State Common Core, Academic Program, University-Wide Baccalaureate, Student Service Units, and external Accrediting Agencies. Initial focus will be on communicating with various entities and developing structures, instruments and means that coordinate and promote participation from various units. Subsequent focus will be on implementing initiatives. Because General Education/State Common Core and Academic Program Assessment are already established and required by the institution, the state of New Mexico, and the HLC, they will be the focal point of the project in the first year.

	Activity	Coordination w/ Campus Community
YR 1: 2009-10		
	Develop Structure/Plan to integrate GE/SCC with APA	GE/SCC: State Committee to determine use/purpose of SCC assessment reporting
		GECC: Determine autonomy of GE from SCC
		SCC Area Coordinators and GE course instructors
		OAC1: Ways of gathering GE data within current APA structure
	GE/SCC and CC	CC Assessment: How doing/what about transferability
	Mapping Initiative	ChAMPION Training Program
		TA: Workshops on Mapping
	APA with External Accreditors	APA: Incorporating APA with external accrediting bodies – Dept. Heads/Program Dir./College Deans
YR 2: 2010-11		
	Implement integration of GE/SCC with APA	
	Investigate Structure/Plan to incorporate FY & Bacc Outcomes	FY & Bacc/APA: Ways of gathering data within existing structures
		A-Team: First Year Instruments & Structures
		Bacc Instruments & Structures
		OAC2: Look at co-curricular structures
	Structure/Plan for VWW	GECC: Assessing VWW – link to Bacc Outcomes
	Mapping Initiative	ChAMPION Training Program
		TA: Workshops on Mapping
		Design University-Wide Mapping Campaign
YR 3: 2011-12		
	Launch University-Wide Mapping Campaign	TA
	Coordinate with CC on GE/SCC	CC Assessment
	Implement FY & Bacc Outcomes Assessment	FY A-Team
	Assess Implementation of GE/SCC w/ APA	
	Assess Progress with External Accreditation	
YR 4: 2012-13		
	Implement Coordinated Efforts with CC on GE/SCC	
	Assess Implementation of FY & Bacc	
	Assess Impact of Mapping	

APA – Academic Program Assessment

A-Team – First Year Assessment Team

Bacc - Baccalaureate

CC – Community Colleges

FY – First Year

GE – General Education

OAC1 – Outcomes Assessment Committee 1 for Academic Program Assessment

OAC2 – Outcomes Assessment Committee 2 for Student Support Assessment

SCC – State Common Core

TA – Teaching Academy

VWW – Viewing Wider World (upper division general education)

Commitment and Focus

DEMONSTRATED COMMITMENT TO AND CAPACITY FOR ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING

The institution has been involved in assessing student learning for close to fifteen years. In that time significant changes have been made both in the understanding of student learning assessment and acceptable methods of assessment. Although efforts may not have consistently realized their full potential, NMSU has a long history and substantiated commitment of engagement in this process. Currently, all academic and student support units are actively involved in the assessment of student learning.

In the document referred to earlier, "Developing a Culture of Assessment: NMSU's Plan to Revitalize Assessment," the institution made a commitment to the HLC to pursue a renewed plan of action for student learning outcomes assessment. It is clearly evident in the above list under RECENT EFFORTS & ACCOMPLISHMENTS that the institution has indeed realized significant progress in its commitment to effectively use evidence of student learning to structure learning opportunities both in the classroom and in the co-curricular environment. Significant time and resource commitment of an upper level administrative position (Assistant to the Provost) to coordinate and facilitate assessment campus-wide, further demonstrates the commitment of the upper administration to fund and support progress in assessment.

Financial support from the Office of the Executive Vice President & Provost to participate in the HLC Assessment Academy in fiscally challenging times and following the unconditional re-accreditation of the institution by the HLC demonstrates a clear commitment by upper administration to support institutional transformation and authentic integration of student learning assessment campus-wide. Implementation of plans and processes developed herein will affect the entire campus community including students, faculty, staff and administrators – everyone is a stakeholder. Because NMSU-Las Cruces is a land-grant institution, progress realized here will extend to the larger community through training programs, co-ops, extension services, outreach, etc. It is also anticipated that progress established here will extend to our four Community College campuses located across the state.

Potential Impact

DESIRED RESULTS OF PARTICIPATION IN FOUR YEARS OF THE ACADEMY – POTENTIAL IMPACT ON THE INSTITUTION, TEACHING AND LEARNING, AND THE CULTURE

The potential impact of the realization of the team goals for the Assessment Academy on the institution is significant. The opportunity for a dynamic integration of all levels of assessment is challenging but attainable. The vision of an institution where assessment is an assumed part of every component in the life of the institution – where evidence of student learning is not simply collected and filed, but transformed into *information* that is used to inform decision making from the classroom to the academic and co-curricular unit, from policy practices to budget allocations, and from hiring choices to annual performance reviews – is enticing.

Done well, this will have tremendous impact on the quality of teaching and learning on our campus. The underlying agenda of this proposal is to develop increased engagement and support of a grass-roots movement that will foster and cultivate an increased value of assessment. Creating something that faculty, administrators and staff alike can accommodate, appreciate, and ultimately embrace has the potential to move assessment from a compliance-driven commodity to an ongoing goal-oriented process for continuously improving teaching and learning. While the complete vision may not be realized in four years, the groundwork can certainly be laid, and the shift in paradigms can be in full swing.

For the institution at large to embrace assessment as an integral part of educating students, constituents and ourselves, all parties must be able to discern how assessment serves them (their students, programs or services). As various parties envision how their individual efforts contribute to the acquisition of global values, skills and behaviors, they will feel increasingly compelled to discuss concerns and collaborate for success across traditional lines of discipline, academia and student support, and colleges. An inclusive vision by faculty, administrators and staff communicates an inclusive vision to students. For students to recognize learning as a collection of *interrelated* experiences, faculty and staff must first establish it as such. Through integrating student learning assessment practices, comprehensive views of student learning will form.

ACADEMY PARTICIPATION CONTRIBUTION TO STUDENT LEARNING

HOW WILL IT BE SIGNIFICANT TO STUDENT LEARNING?

Students are the number one benefactors of integrating and institutionalizing outcomes-based learning. Because focus is on the learner, all efforts go into strengthening and increasing student learning and application of skills, knowledge and values. A unified community has clear expectations that are communicated consistently to the student. All efforts are tied to common goals. Students are aware of and are active participants in the achievement of common goals. Students, faculty and staff alike understand the contribution each program, initiative or course makes to the goal. Student can then see their curriculum not as a collection of courses that stand between them and a degree, but rather as a series of interrelated experiences that contribute to the attainment of life and academic skills necessary for professional and personal success.